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October 12, 2021

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

I appreciate your efforts to get United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) employees back to work and efficiently serving our farmers and rural communities. However, I believe this expansive federal vaccine mandate is wrong and its impact may destroy careers and the viability of USDA offices across the country.

America is well on its way to combating this pandemic. More than 65 percent of U.S. citizens have at least one dose of the vaccine, with countless more individuals already obtaining antibodies through exposure to COVID-19. In the months ahead, this pandemic will hopefully be behind us and Americans can get back to normal again. But should Biden's mandate take effect, millions of workers will be targeted, terminated, and thus unfairly lose their livelihoods and careers because of an ill-advised vaccine demand by the federal government.

According to the USDA COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plan released on September 24, 2021, "all USDA employees must be fully vaccinated by November 22, 2021," with very limited exemptions. My office and I have heard from several employees, contractors, and visitors who have expressed concern over this directive, and many employees are considering leaving their current roles due to this mandate. This is concerning for several reasons, especially because you mentioned during an appropriations hearing in June that some staff were already working multiple jobs due to current USDA shortages. Other businesses across Missouri and across the country are open for business and the federal government should be no different.

This month, when asked about how this vaccine mandate may impact staff shortages and potentially slowing the farmer application process, you said, "I'm not overly concerned that we're not going to get the work done, because people step up." While I agree that USDA employees are generally resilient and farmer focused, staff can only sustain a stressed work environment for so long and an increase in lost staff would have detrimental impacts on the

USDA's efficiency and impact. Because of these reasons, I request answers to the following questions:

1. What is your plan to ensure farmer applications are processed, services are provided, and reports are issued in a timely manner if staff shortages increase after November 22, 2021?
2. Has the agency conducted any surveys on how a federal vaccine mandate would impact staffing numbers across the country? If this data is available, does it show that county level offices will remain operational?
3. Will you consider issuing waivers from this policy for offices that would close due to staff shortages?

I believe this mandate is unwarranted, unwise, and unfair to the many other essential businesses in the private sector which are remaining open to the public. Shouldn't the U.S. government provide equal or better customer service?

Thank you and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Vicky Hartzler
Member of Congress